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EDITORIAL

One function of our literature courses, we are all now agreed, is to teach patriotism; and in selecting the subject-matter of our courses we give an unaccustomed preference to American literature, especially to strong expressions of devotion to our country and flag. This method of choosing and handling literature to accomplish a specific purpose is in sharp contrast to our usual policy. We have, it is true, always insisted that the study of literature is a means of moral culture, and we have sometimes made our teaching painfully didactic. All this, however, has not greatly influenced our selection of literature for study. The most progressive teachers have rarely gone farther than to ask whether the influence of any work proposed for use in school was likely to be wholesome. May it not be that we shall soon be building our courses systematically to produce certain desired changes in the tastes and ideals of our pupils?

The whole school curriculum of the future will be built up by listing, so far as is possible, the specific knowledges, skills, and attitudes necessary to the social efficiency of the individual, and then by determining the experiences through which the child may most surely gain these things. Far from being visionary, such procedure is already beginning to be employed. The especial service of literature will be in the field of the attitudes—that is, the ideals, tastes, and emotional disposition. No student of modern psychology needs to be reminded how close these lie to volition. “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” Moreover, except for the personal contacts of class and school management, literature is the chief force which secular education can employ in this field. Upon us teachers of literature, then, devolves the duty of surveying the attitudes desirable in an American citizen and of organizing a series of experiences which will create those attitudes.

All this involves not merely a testing of American ideals, such as devotion to country, justice, endurance, industry, and cheerfulness, and of desirable tastes, such as love of euphonious language and interest in character analysis, but also a careful study of the means by which permanent attitudes are created, especially of the manner in which they are created by literature. So far as this has been worked out, the means are these: (1) direct suggestion, which we used to disparage as "preaching," but which Wilson's speeches have proved may sometimes be very effective; and (2) vicarious experience. That which gives satisfaction—not necessarily worldly success—to the character with whom the reader sympathizes is inevitably stamped with approval in the reader's mind. Essays and lyric poetry will be chosen for their direct suggestion; fiction and drama for their presentation of sympathetic characters, getting satisfaction from behavior of the sorts we desire. Since the whole effect sought lies in the realm of the feelings, the student is not to be asked to moralize or to analyze very minutely, but rather is to be helped to abandon himself to the thought and mood of the author.

In brief, the steps in the proposed reorganization are (1) an inventory of the attitudes it is desirable to establish, (2) a systematic selection of literature to create these attitudes, and (3) inspirational—not didactic—teaching of this literature.